



# FACING the MEDIA

Story by Beth Reece

Photo by SSG Alberto Betancourt

**S**OLDIERS are making headlines. “We have a good story to tell and folks are interested in what we have to say,” said Warren Nordman, chief of the Army Public Affairs Executive Communications Branch.

The American public is curious about what soldiers do and why, so reporters are asking. But not everyone feels comfortable in the limelight.

The Executive Communications Branch helps turn nervous interviewees into confident speakers in three-hour workshops that cover the dos and don’ts of facing the media.

SFC Jeffrey T. Stitzel, the Army’s 2002 NCO of the Year, attended the workshop last summer. Overcoming fear and self-criticism had been a challenge for him whenever he was interviewed by the media throughout his career, Stitzel said, but the workshop boosted his confidence.

Talking to a reporter is a little like appearing before a promotion board — preparation and practice are key. Soldiers being interviewed for TV, radio or print should always give themselves

time to mentally prepare and check their appearances. It’s okay, Nordman said, to tell a reporter: “I’d love to talk with you about the Army, but need a few moments to prepare myself.”

An impromptu interview feels less threatening when a soldier requests such information as the reporter’s name, organization, story focus, deadline and whether the interview will be live or taped, Nordman said.

“The more you know about an interview, the better you’ll perform. Find out why the reporter wants to speak to you and who else he’s talked to, so you can get a sense of how much he already knows about the subject,” Nordman said.

Touching base with your public affairs office is always important.

Studies show that it’s not always what a source says, but how he or she looks and sounds that often shapes public perception.

Nordman said soldiers shouldn’t take a briefing-the-troops approach when doing interviews. Public opinion is often shaped by whether a speaker comes across as informal or stiff, and conversational or pontifical.

“Be yourself. And remember who your real audience is — the reporter is just a conduit,” he said.

If a phone interview is possible, Nordman recommended that soldiers

accept it. Phone interviews allow the interviewee to use notes while answering questions. And standing during a phone interview makes the voice sound more animated and energetic.

## WHAT’S YOUR POINT?

Soldiers can guide and control interviews by crafting key messages — or talking points — with details that lend credibility to each message.

By anticipating reporters’ questions, soldiers allow themselves to prepare honest and positive responses, and avoid a struggle for answers that audiences can usually detect.

Although print interviews tend to be more in-depth than radio and TV interviews, communication experts still suggest that soldiers keep their messages short and to-the-point.

Soldiers may use various techniques to control the direction of interviews. Sometimes reporters will pause, which allows the interviewee to interject an important bit of information.

Repetition and consistency increase the chances that messages will be used. “The more you say something, the better the chances that’s what’s going to be in the newspaper tomorrow or on the air tonight,” Nordman said.

Because 99 percent of interviews are taped, not live, soldiers are encouraged to correct any inaccuracies on the spot. Even during live interviews, it’s reasonable to backtrack and correct an earlier statement, Nordman added.

While “no comment” is never a good answer, saying “I don’t know” is better than making up an answer about an unfamiliar subject.

Communications experts agree that soldiers are the Army’s best spokespersons.

“This is an opportunity for soldiers to personalize the Army’s message,” Nordman said. “Soldiers shouldn’t be afraid to get excited in front of the camera. That sends the signal that what they’re saying is important to them, and that people should listen.” □

*To learn more about the Communications Workshop or to schedule a class, write to [mediaworkshop@hqda.army.mil](mailto:mediaworkshop@hqda.army.mil).*

